

Some Aspects of Symbolic Use of Lights in the Eastern Church Candles, Lamps and Ostrich Eggs

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In Greco-Roman times there were many ways of honouring a person of high importance.* For example, certain dignitaries of the empire were honoured with lights which were carried before them. Lights appear as symbols of office at least in the *Notitia dignitatum* (c. A.D. 405–425). In other instances portraits of persons of noble birth were placed on a table surrounded by candles burning on candelabras. The use of lights for honouring a person can be traced back to the illumination in sanctuaries, common during ceremonies of cult, achieved by various means such as torches, candles and lamps.¹

The custom passed into the Christian tradition which borrowed related customs from the Jewish tradition as well. It is known, for instance, that the ceremonial bringing and blessing of a lamp, a customary part of the *chaburâh*, was introduced into

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1. F. Cabriol, H. Leclercq, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, III, 2, cols. 1613–22 with further references [herein after cited as *DACL*]; D. R. Dendy, *The Use of Lights in Christian Worship* (London, 1959), pp. 74, 75; this is a very good treatment of the subject with extensive bibliography but it does not deal with symbolism or customs of the Eastern Church [cited as *Lights*]; G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London, 1954), pp. 418ff. [cited as *Shape*]; G. Schreiber, *Die Wochentage im Erlebnis der Ostkirche und des christlichen Abendlandes* (Cologne-Opladen, 1959).

the Christian service of the *lucernarium* already in the fourth century.²

In the Early Church the illumination of a holy place had above all practical purposes, especially when the Eucharist was celebrated in the early morning hours. This necessity was true for the pre-Nicene Church. Candles and oil-lamps were necessary for the service. In addition, lights were used as ornaments, as can be deduced from the description of St. Sophia in Constantinople by Paul Silentiarius (563) who provides one of the earliest instances of the 'Tree of Light'. He refers to lamps as 'trees like pines growing on the mountains'. Ornaments of this type added majesty and splendour to the House of God.³

There are, however, other more specific uses of lamps or candles. Placed on the altar, lighted during the liturgy, in special ceremonies, sacraments and rites, lights were very important. These various uses, whatever their origin in the pre-Christian world, were imbued with a deeper meaning.⁴ They became types and symbols which took the whole concept of illumination away from the realm of pure practicality or aesthetic splendour. The lights that were carried in front of Roman dignitaries or lit before portraits of princes now burned before the images of the saints. Some students of the Christian liturgy have suggested that the tapers, carried before the Gospels during the Little Entrance, reflect the pagan custom or imperial ceremonies.⁵

It is not our intention in this short paper, a humble homage to Steven Runciman whose work has illuminated every area of the Byzantine world, to discuss the types of illumination, the special uses of lights and their complex symbolism in the Eastern Church. The book on this important subject remains to be written. Our intention is to sketch a few aspects of the problem and point to some symbolic uses of lights mainly in the

2. Dix, *Shape*, pp. 87, 418ff.; Dendy, *Lights*, p. x.

3. *Descript. S. Sophiae*, II, 457–58; Silentiarius describes the various arrangements of the lamps; see E. M. Antoniades, *Ekphrasis tēs Agias Sophias* (Athens, 1909), III, pp. 138ff. (here the various types of lamps used in the church are described); Dendy, *Lights*, pp. 1ff., 8, 9.

4. In general, see J. Sauer, *Symbolik des Kirchengebäudes*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg i. Breisgau, 1924), pp. 185ff.

5. Dix, *Shape*, p. 418; J. A. Jungmann, *Missarum solemnia*, 3rd ed. (Vienna, 1952), I, pp. 89ff.; Dendy, *Lights*, pp. 83, 108ff.

Byzantine Church with the hope that these lines may be useful for a detailed discussion of the problem in the future.

It is generally known that the flame, whether of a taper or an oil lamp, is the symbol of the eternal clarity of heaven or a symbol of the light of faith.⁶ However, he who reads carefully the liturgical books of the Eastern Churches, Euchologia, Typika, Homilies or books describing ceremonies becomes aware of two, broadly speaking, symbolic uses of lights: one which relates the lights to the metaphysical concept of light and another which sees them as specific symbols in a typological sense. (We must make it clear that we do not discuss here the philosophical aspects of light.)⁷ A few examples suffice to illustrate these general trends. In the seventh century Sophronius of Jerusalem in his liturgical commentary says that 'the lamps and the candles are symbols of eternal light; but also they reveal the light which will shine forth from the just [at their resurrection]'.⁸ Both symbolic trends are apparent in this passage: the metaphysical, and the specific, typological one. The same author speaking of the candles carried with the Gospels during the Little Entrance, says that they reveal the divine light.⁹ Much earlier, in the fourth century, Gregory of Nazianzus in his sermon on Baptism speaking of the newly baptized refers to the torches which they would light as prefiguring the lights with which one day the faithful would go forth to meet the bridegroom.¹⁰ This is an example of symbolic prefiguration, a typological use of lights. On the other hand Cyril of Jerusalem, speaking of the same question, uses the expression 'torches of the bridal procession', suggesting in a more general way that the lighted torches constitute a symbol of the marriage of the soul with Christ.¹¹

6. *DACL*, III, 2, col. 1618; I. F. Hapgood, *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church*, rev. ed. (New York, 1922), pp. xxxivf.

7. For this aspect of the problem in general, see J. Hofer, K. Rahner eds., *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (Freiburg i. Breisgau, 1957), VI, pp. 1022–7; cf. also G. Mathew, *Byzantine Aesthetics* (London, 1963), *passim*.

8. *MPG*, LXXXVII, part 3, 3985; for the problems of authorship see H.-G. Beck, *Kirche und theologische Literatur im byzantinischen Reich* (Munich, 1959), pp. 435–6.

9. *Ibid.*, 3993.

10. *MPG*, XXXVI, 426; Dendy, *Lights*, p. 123.

11. *MPG*, XXXIII, 233.

Another example, illustrating the metaphysical meaning given to the lights, is provided by the *akolouthia* of the *mikrou angelikou schematos*. While the Gospel according to St. Matthew (ch. 5:16) is read, a candle is lit simultaneously with the reading of the following verses: 'The Lord said: even so let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven.' The same rite is repeated in the *akolouthia* of the *megalou angelikou schematos*.¹² In this rite, it is the association of the reading of the gospel's text with the lighting of the candle that gives a symbolic meaning to the flame. The lit candle relates to the metaphysical light—it symbolizes the illumination which man acquires from God. The examples could be multiplied if we were to search carefully through Byzantine literature. But it is in the Late Byzantine period that the symbolic use of lights in the liturgy and the ritual is dealt with in some detail.

The treatise *On the Holy Temple* by Symeon of Thessalonica (died 1429) is our best source from this period. In general Symeon expounds a mystical interpretation of church lights as the following lines can demonstrate: 'By seeing the saints and their beauty and through the light of the divine lights [lamps and tapers] our sight becomes bright and holy and we shine within'.¹³ Clearly, the lamps and tapers symbolize the inner light. In another instance he associates the metaphysical light, the light of God with the light of candles and lamps. Speaking of the illumination of the church during the sacrament of Ordination, he says that the lights are lit 'for the glory of the great light, and as an indication of the divine illumination bestowed [upon the person who is being ordained]'.¹⁴

But of all the ceremonies described by Symeon in which lights play an important role that of the *encaenia* is most revealing of the symbolic uses of lights. We have chosen some parts of the ceremony which gives us an indication of the kind of symbolism found in Symeon's treatise. For ritual details not given by Symeon we refer to the *Euchologion*.

12. *Euchologion to mega* (Athens, 1927), pp. 146, 162, cited as *Euchologion*.

13. *MPG*, CLV, 344; a thorough examination of this treatise must be undertaken within the scope of a larger study of the problem of the symbolic use of lights.

14. *Ibid.*, 368.

On the eve of the *encaenia* and before the Vespers the archpriest and clergy take the relics that are to be deposited in the new church to an already consecrated church and place them on the altar. A taper is lit which must burn through the night.¹⁵ Next day after the completion of the Orthros, performed in the church that is to be inaugurated, the archpriest returns to the old church, takes the relics and carries them in procession to the new church. Hymns are chanted and lights are being carried in honour of the saints.¹⁶ After a ceremonial opening of the new church, following a series of carefully performed rites and the reading of the gospels, a new lamp, wick and oil are brought to the archpriest who with his own hands fills the lamp with oil, lights the wick and places the lamp on the altar. Then the church wardens are allowed to bring in lamps and candles and decorate the church.¹⁷ The symbolic meaning of acts and implements are stated by Symeon: '... the lamp [hung above the altar] indicates that the Church is the Lamp of Christ. . . . It also symbolizes the Church of Christ . . . shining through the light of Grace'. At the same time it has a more intricate symbolism: 'the lamp of the Law was a prefiguration of this lamp (the Church) . . . the divine illumination is bestowed by the lighting of the lights. . . .'¹⁸ Here Symeon speaks of the real objects as well as of their typological symbolism. And in another case, speaking of the altar-lamp, he says that the light of the lamp is the symbol of the light that comes from above, of the divine illumination deriving from the true light, Christ who dwells in the newly inaugurated church. The new church is filled with lights which manifest the lights of heaven, and as it is fully lit with tapers, the church is compared to another heaven.¹⁹ And elsewhere, Symeon, moving into a more general symbolic interpretation of the illumination of the church, tells us that the beauty of the illuminated church teaches us the beauty of the universe. The

15. *Euchologion*, p. 219. The custom has a parallel in the Western Church. Gregory of Tours and other sources speak of laying relics on the altar and keeping vigil during the night before they are placed in the altar. A similar custom is described by the Pontifical of Egbert, see Dendy, *Lights*, p. 184.

16. *Euchologion*, p. 229; *MPG*, CLV, 321.

17. *Euchologion*, p. 242. In some cases in the West it is noted that the church should be lit up when the dedication is over; see Dendy, *Lights*, p. 184.

18. *MPG*, CLV, 317, 320.

19. *Ibid.*, 308, 328, 329.

lamps suspended from the vaults imitate the stars.²⁰ Here we sum up the main points again: candles and lamps are means of honour; they are symbols of divine illumination; the altar-lamp is a symbol of the Church; there is a relation between the lights in the church and the celestial light.

The image of the church being a symbol of the universe is an old one, found in earlier mystical writings and commentaries on the Divine Liturgy.²¹ The special symbolism of the suspended lamps as images of stars is also found in such writings; it occurs, for example, in the writings of Sophronius of Jerusalem.²² It is not, however, limited to the Byzantine Church.

Towards the end of the thirteenth century an important treatise on the mystic symbolism of the Church was written in Egypt by the Jacobite John (Youhanna) son of Abou-Zakariya. Entitled the *Precious Pearl*, this essay is a kind of theological and liturgical encyclopaedia, referring to the usage of the Coptic Church. The extant manuscripts (the oldest one dates from the fourteenth century) are written in Arabic. The text published and translated into French by Jean Périier, contains important material pertaining to the symbolism of the church as a building which has not attracted the attention of scholars.²³ The 54th chapter is devoted to the rite of the consecration of a church, the *encaenia*, and concludes with the following lines: ‘... the terrestrial church is the image of the celestial Jerusalem, the priests are terrestrial angels and celestial men ...’.²⁴ This statement recalls the somewhat similar text by Sophronius of Jerusalem, ‘the priests are like unto archangels’.²⁵ In the next chapter, dealing with the symbolism of the lamps, we read: ‘it is proper that the terrestrial church be adorned with every possible

20. Ibid., 708.

21. Cf. Pseudo-Germanus stating that the church is the terrestrial heaven, *MPG*, XCL, 384.

22. *MPG*, LXXXVII, 3984. It is of interest to point out that the image of lamps being the stars of heaven is found in Silentiarius’ description of St. Sophia but this may be due to a poetical enthusiasm more than a religious symbolism; ‘the whole heaven, scattered with glittering stars, opens before them ...’ see W. R. Lethaby, H. Swainson, *The Church of Sancta Sophia* (London, New York, 1894), p. 51.

23. *Patrologia Orientalis*, XVI (1922), pp. 591–760.

24. Ibid., p. 753.

25. *MPG*, LXXXVII, part 3, 3984.

splendour. All lamps must be illuminated during the prayers and the Sacrifice, because the lamps are the stars of the terrestrial sky. . . .'²⁶ While these lines reflect the Greek texts and point to a common tradition, they contain some different nuances of thought. The Jacobite author likes a concreteness of imagery. For him the church-lamps *are* the stars of the terrestrial sky. These minor differences, suggesting a more concrete approach to symbolism, appear in other parts of the treatise as well.

The meaning of the lamps is pursued further, and after we are provided with an intricate symbolism of each part of the lamp, another important element is added. Between the lamps and on the chandelier, we are told, ostrich eggs are suspended for a rather complex reason. Male and female ostriches do not cover their eggs in order to hatch them. They concentrate simply on watching them until hatching time. If the male is hungry or thirsty during the period of vigil, he cries out and the female, understanding the situation by an innate instinct, turns her attention to the eggs so that never, for one moment, are they left unguarded. The same procedure is followed when the female is hungry or thirsty. The male takes over the watch. If one of the parents ceases fixing the eyes on the eggs, the hatching never takes place. One then takes the spoilt egg and suspends it in the church, between the lamps, to be seen by all. It is to serve not as ornament but to exhort those who see it not to distract their spirit from prayer and let it become like a spoilt egg, because of a faulty vigil.²⁷

To this day the pilgrim who journeys to the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai is astonished to see a series of ostrich eggs suspended from the ceiling.²⁸ It is not without significance that the treatise was written in Egypt by a Jacobite. And it is well known that Sinai had relations not only with the Orthodox Church but also with the Syrian Church. Besides, apart from

26. *Patrologia Orientalis*, loc. cit.

27. ' . . . non pour le faire servir d'ornement, mais pour exhorter ceux qui le voient à ne pas distraire leur esprit de la prière, ce qui la gêterait comme a été gâté l'œuf, faute d'être couvé par le regard'. Ibid., p. 755.

28. For an illustration of the nave of the church with the suspended eggs, see G. H. Forsyth and K. Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai*, Plates (Ann Arbor, n.d.), pl. XLIII.

doctrinal matters, it must be remembered that Sinai is located in the crossroads of faith. But Sinai is not unique in this use of ostrich eggs. In fact they are suspended in Greek, Coptic, Nestorian churches, mosques and *turbes* as well all over the Near East. Until the last century the chandeliers that hang from the dome of St. Sophia in Constantinople with lamps and glass vases with floating wicks had among them suspended ostrich eggs which were still seen by pilgrims in the late eighteenth century. In Greece ostrich eggs in churches are rare. The custom, however, was widely spread in the West as well during the Middle Ages and later, and according to an incorrect opinion, it was brought there by the crusaders. Some scholars have thought it to be a decorative motif or at least one of the oddities found in sacred buildings. This opinion is definitely refuted by the cited text.²⁹

Recently the ostrich egg has become the centre of controversy since, according to most prevalent opinion, the egg is found, among other western monuments, in the Brera altarpiece by Pierro della Francesca. The controversy has drawn attention to the meaning of the egg.³⁰ The original purpose seems to have been prophylactic. It is said that ostrich eggs are suspended as talismans against the evil eye or, in some instances, they function as charms. A religious symbolism, at times a complex one, has been developed as well. In general, among Christians the ostrich egg is considered to be an emblem of faith. It is not our intention to enter the Pierro della Francesca controversy. Suffice it to say that the ostrich egg has been further associated with the virgin birth of Christ, His death and resurrection.

29. For an indication of churches and other buildings where lamps with ostrich eggs are suspended, see W. R. Lethaby, *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth* (New York, 1892), pp. 255ff.; see also Antoniadès, op. cit., III, p. 144.

30. The latest study on the subject with all pertinent bibliography is by M. Meiss, 'Ovum Struthionis: Symbol and Allusion in Pierro della Francesca's Montefeltro Altarpiece', revised and reprinted in *The Painter's Choice* (New York, 1976), pp. 105–29; see also I. Ragusa, 'The Egg Reopened', *Art Bulletin*, LIII (1971), 453ff.; and C. Gilbert, "'The Egg reopened" Again', *ibid.*, LVI (1974), 252ff.; F. W. Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans* (Oxford, 1929), I, pp. 232, 233. It should be stated, however, that the first who drew attention to the presence of an ostrich egg in Italian fifteenth-century paintings, including one by A. Mantegna, was W. R. Lethaby, op. cit., pp. 260, 261.

As far as we are concerned here, the main source for the Christian symbolism of the ostrich egg is the *Physiologus*, the book which furnished all the data to the medieval encyclopaedias from Isidore of Seville to Vincent of Beauvais and their later derivations. In the West, among other sources, another influential source was the treatise *Rationale divinarum officiorum* by bishop Durandus (died 1296). The *Physiologus* in its moralizing commentary tells us the following: 'The eggs are suspended in the church as a symbol for us so that while we stand in prayer let us have our eyes towards God so that our sins may be effaced'.³¹

The explanation approximates that given in the Coptic treatise but it is not quite the same. A paraphrase of the treatise would be: we must not take our eyes away from God lest our spirit becomes a spoilt egg. According to an Islamic tradition the ostrich eggs are considered to be suspended as a warning to men, that if they are bad, God will break them in the same way as an ostrich breaks her eggs.³² Another, oral tradition, referring specifically to the candelabra of St. Sophia in Constantinople, and reported in the mid-nineteenth century, interprets the eggs as symbols of the planets.³³ There is, however, still another Islamic interpretation of the nature of the ostrich egg: 'the ostrich egg is suspended in the mosque as a reminder that the faithful must keep their eyes and minds fixed on the true goal'.³⁴ This interpretation is very similar to that given by the *Precious Pearl* which, it seems, was not known to the student of the Piero della Francesca altarpiece who was thus led to believe that the Islamic symbolism was the opposite to the Christian one. The *Precious Pearl* relates the Christian to the Islamic tradition. Whether one derives from the other or both have a common source we do not know.

The fact that this particular interpretation is common in Christian and Islamic thought may well suggest the dissemination of this symbolism along with the spreading of the custom to the West. If this hypothesis were to be substantiated

31. *Physiologus*, ed. F. Sbordone (Milan, Genoa, Rome, Naples, 1936), p. 223; cf. also p. 315.

32. Hasluck, op. cit., I, p. 233.

33. Antoniadès, op. cit., III, p. 144.

34. Cited by Meiss, op. cit., p. 107, with reference to the original source.

through a detailed study of western sources, then the starred ceiling and the ostrich egg in the frescoes in the church of St. Francesco at Lodi (fourteenth century), which have played an important role in the controversy about Piero della Francesca,³⁵ may be interpreted in a different way, perhaps in relation to the symbolism of the lamps and eggs in the Byzantine and Coptic churches. But this would have meant to 'reopen the egg' and enter into the problem of the contribution of Byzantium to the Renaissance.³⁶

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35. Discussed by I. Ragusa, *op. cit.*, see above n. 30.

36. Cf. S. Runciman, *Byzantium and the Renaissance* (Tucson, 1970).